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YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR FINDING SUCCESS AFTER FRANCHISING BUSINESS

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Woody Marshall, The Telegraph

Stewart Vernon, owner of ASP Franchising Inc. and partner in ASP Pool and Spa Co., took over a small pool maintenance and repair business after he left college.

STEWART VERNON

When Stewart Vernon was in college he was recognized as entrepreneur of the year, and the accompanying \$500 was put to good use.

The cash prize was what Vernon, then 22, used to open the first checking account for his pool service, repair and maintenance business, originally named All Seasons Pool Co. and now ASP Pool and Spa Co.

"I had no store front," Vernon said. "All I had was a computer and a truck. I basically started the business with about \$3,000 to buy my supplies and marketing materials."

Vernon has come a long way in a short time.

Not only is ASP Pool and Spa in Macon a thriving business with seven trucks servicing and maintaining about 250 pools a month, but it has a retail store on Forsyth Road. Two other ASP Pool and Spa businesses were opened in South Carolina.

Then two years ago, Vernon took his pool business model and turned it into a franchise business - called ASP Franchising Inc. - with multiple locations. He took on a partner in ASP Pool of Macon and remains a majority owner.

Along the way, he has owned multiple rental properties as investments and built spec houses and sold them.

While the progression of his career has been fairly quick, Vernon caught the entrepreneur bug at an early age.

Born in Macon and son of local pediatrician Minor Vernon, Stewart Vernon knew as a teen he wanted to be his own boss.

While Vernon played a lot of sports, once he got into high school, "I realized I probably enjoyed working and making money more than playing sports," he said.

When Vernon was 15, he started a car detail service in Macon, called Complete Auto Detail, and worked out of his parents' home or at customers' houses. By his junior year, he hired a couple of friends to work with him.

"I saved a good bit of the money," he said. "One of the appeals to being self-employed - and I could tell this at age 16 or 17 - it gave me the freedom to control my income."

A friend gave him a chart showing how compounding money worked.

"I knew if I put a little bit away at 17, it would be better than putting a little bit away at 27," he said. "Not that it was a significant amount of money, but it was a start."

While attending the College of Charleston, he operated a rickshaw - a passenger cart pulled by a bicycle - for nearly two years. But he returned to his car detail business the last two years of college.

When he returned to Macon he stumbled upon Al Hortman, who was looking to retire and sell his small pool maintenance and repair business. After working in the business a few months, Vernon took it over with Hortman's five customers. He soon added more customers and added pool servicing and renovation to the business and opened the retail store.

Then in 2004, Vernon brought in his first employee, Matt Dayton, who worked part time as he was finishing up at Mercer University. Within two years, Dayton purchased a minority interest in the business and was made a partner.

"I knew that, long-term, if I grew the business the way I wanted to I would need a partner more than I would need a good employee in the beginning," Vernon said.

Dayton and Vernon have known each other since they were teenagers.

"I had my degree in marketing and I was ready to go out in the professional world," Dayton said. "But I saw the potential in (Stewart's) business. He's a really good guy to work for and work with. ... He demands a lot but he's fair. He has a good overall knowledge of the business."

The same year Vernon brought Dayton into the business, Vernon bought Macon-based Central Georgia Pool Management, which handles the staffing and management for country club pools. The summer-only operation had about 50 lifeguards who staffed area country clubs.

Vernon is now downsizing that company because of increased demands in his other business.

A FRANCHISE IS BORN

As ASP Pool and Spa business grew, in 2005 ASP bought out local competitor Macon Pool Sweep. The same year, Vernon, after failing to persuade his brother-in-law in Clemson, S.C., to move here and join the pool business, decided to have his brother-in-law open a pool business there.

"This was my first time in seeing that I can take this business model we've laid out, and I can teach this business to individuals in other locations," Vernon said.

His brother-in-law opened ASP of Clemson in spring 2005. By the end of 2005, Vernon was approached by his stockbroker in Charleston, S.C., because he and his friends were looking to buy a service business.

"They brought the word 'franchise' to me," he said. "I kind of laughed and said, 'maybe one day, I don't know.' "

But as he gave it more thought - and he studied franchising for about six months - it sounded a lot like what he had already done with his brother-in-law.

"It's laying out the model of a successful business for someone else to follow," Vernon said.

In September 2005 the first franchise was set up in Charleston.

Vernon took the money earned from that franchise and paid a Boston consulting firm to help him set up the franchising business with all the legal contracts and agreements he needed. That's when ASP Franchising Inc. was formed.

Very quickly the third franchise, and the first true one, was set up in Warner Robins. He later brought in the other ASP Pool and Spa businesses under the franchise umbrella.

During the past year and a half, the franchise business has grown by leaps and bounds. The company has 12 locations with the 13th set to open in Florida this year.

The existing franchise owners are either friends of Vernon's or people with previous knowledge of the pool business. Some owners are looking for a career change and some are looking to start their own business, he said.

"If you have the franchise fee, a truck, some advertising and some tools, you can be fully operational in our business for under \$50,000," Vernon said. "We haven't lost a franchise yet."

Vernon said he wasn't surprised at the success of ASP Pool and Spa, but the brisk pace of the franchise business caught him off guard.

"I never dreamed we would start franchising the company," he said. "I had to lay out all the chips on the table because I was going to sell the three closest territories to me. I was going to box myself in. But because I sold the surrounding territories, it allowed me to go into Atlanta, to sell Valdosta and to put one in Mount Pleasant, S.C."

He credits Dayton and other employees for helping him grow the business.

"We have a good template that allowed the franchising business," he said. "My absolutely favorite part of the franchising business is teaching somebody this business. I love watching them get their first customer."

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